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My Turn: Sheila Polk, Bill Montgomery, Barbara LaWall

Five Public Safety Headlines You Didn't See in 2015...But Should Have

2015 saw the media fixated on perceived problems with the criminal justice system and specious suggestions for reform. In the background Arizona's public safety community has kept our residents safer than ever. Here is what you didn't learn:

Arizona crime rates fall to 40-50 year lows. The FBI's annual crime data shows that crime rates in Arizona continue to fall: violent crime sank to the lowest level since 1971; property crime is at a level not seen since 1963. Of course, crime is falling all across the nation (despite a 2015 Gallup poll that showed 70 percent of Americans think crime is rising) – but the big news in Arizona is that we are outpacing the national decline by a significant margin. Theories abound on why, but one that cannot be ignored is that our criminal justice policies are working exactly as intended to target and incapacitate those responsible for the majority of offenses in our communities.

Victims' rights remain strong. Arizona commemorated the 25th anniversary of the passage of a Victims' Bill of Rights in 2015. What was once unimaginable is now routine: victims are notified of all court proceedings and are entitled to be present at any hearing where a defendant is present. Their right to be heard, at sentencing or before any plea agreement is offered or approved, is being exercised. In the latest sign of Arizona's commitment to treat victims with fairness, dignity and respect, this year our state Supreme Court overruled a trial court and affirmed a victim's right to representation by private counsel and to present arguments in pre-trial hearings.

Arizona continues to develop alternatives to incarceration. Since the passage of Proposition 200 in the 1990s, which provided diversion programs to many first and second time drug offenders, Arizona has been a leader in creating non-prison resolutions for non-dangerous, non-violent felons. Our specialty problem solving courts for cases involving veterans, the mentally ill and homeless continue to grow and develop throughout the state. Pima County's pioneering Drug Treatment Alternative to Prison (DTAP) program validates a non-prison approach that saves lives, saves money and reduces crime. In 2015, Maricopa County launched a Felony Pretrial Intervention Program, offering non-violent offenders a chance to have their cases dismissed if they make full restitution to their victims and successfully complete required treatment programs.

The fruits of criminal activity are diverted to victims and public safety. Arizona continued to thwart illegal activity by removing the tools used and the profits made from crime. In the fiscal year that ended in 2015, roughly \$65 million in assets connected to criminal activity was seized and returned to

the state to compensate victims, provide witness protection, fund prisoner re-entry programs, support drug and gang prevention education, offer substance abuse treatment services, and train and equip police officers. Contrary to claims by special interest groups seeking to dismantle these efforts, Arizona's civil forfeiture process afforded due process, judicial oversight, as well as notice and opportunity for property owners to be heard.

Spending on public safety remains unchanged. Arizona's general fund expenditures for criminal justice, corrections, and public safety held steady in 2015, representing about 12% of the state budget, a proportion that has remained virtually unchanged since 1990. Contrary to the claims of many critics, there was no massive expansion of state spending on police and prisons, nor has spending outpaced our population or economic growth. If anything, our criminal justice dollar is going farther, keeping us safer, and generating a return that is difficult to put a price on.

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